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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 007454

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/BCLTV, INR/B
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2015

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON PRIVY
COUNSELOR PALAKORN

REF: BANGKOK 5503

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador called on Privy Counselor Palakorn Suanrath to discuss the situation in southern Thailand. Palakorn -- who served as director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) prior to its 2002 dissolution by Prime Minister Thaksin -- is known to be a close advisor to the royal family on the South. Palakorn believes Thaksin's decision to give the police primacy in the South -- coupled with a personal lack of understanding of the situation -- has exacerbated the violence in the region. He emphasized the ethnic rather than religious nature of the conflict. Palakorn was dismissive of the National Reconciliation Commission and said efforts to establish a dialogue with separatist groups would likely end in failure. Ambassador expressed serious concern over past "disappearances" and rumors that the government might use extra-judicial killings (EJKs) to target suspected militants. END SUMMARY

2. (C) On November 30 Ambassador called on Privy Counselor Palakorn Suanrath. Palakorn -- who served as director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) from 1997 to 2001 -- is known to be a close advisor to the royal family on the South and travels with the Queen to the region during her annual visits (NOTE: Biographic information attached. END NOTE).

THAKSIN MISSTEPS FUEL THE PROBLEM

3. (C) Palakorn said that Thaksin's decision to give the police primacy in the South shortly after taking office in 2001, coupled with a lack of understanding of the historical factors, has exacerbated the violence in the region (reftel). He lamented that Thaksin had ignored the successful policies created in the 1980s by then Prime Minister Prem and characterized Thaksin's dissolution of the highly successful SBPAC and the combined Civilian, Military, and Police command (CMP-43) in April 2002 as the "turning point" in the unrest. Thaksin's advisors convinced him that the joint commands were "Democrat Party institutions," which could not be trusted. Palakorn expressed concern that Thaksin was still not getting reliable information on the situation from his senior advisors.

CONCERN OVER DISAPPEARANCES

4. (C) Palakorn said that Thaksin's decision in 2001 to appoint Police General Sant Sarutanond as Police Commissioner-General was another turning point in the southern situation; "that's when people started to disappear." He believes that General Sant was directly involved in the disappearance of prominent Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaiji in March 2004 and that Thaksin either approved the operation, or was at least aware that government agents would carry it out.

5. (C) Ambassador strongly emphasized USG concern over this and other reported cases of disappearances. He expressed deep unease over recent speculation that that RTG planned to take a more aggressive approach to the South, potentially leading to EJKs of suspected militants. Palakorn said he had also "heard these reports," but indicated that specific concern over Interior Minister Chitchai's involvement in ordering such operations may be overstated. He opined that Chitchai, while an advocate of harder measures, understood the potential negative ramifications of EJKs and was looking at several different approaches to dealing with suspected militants.

6. (C) Palakorn believes that General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the recently appointed Thai Army commander, will not have a significant impact on southern policy. Many had hoped that Sonthi, a Muslim, would act as a moderating influence. However, Sonthi -- who is "a Bangkok Muslim" -- has little experience in the South and does not have special access or influence.

NO END TO VIOLENCE WHILE THAKSIN IN POWER

17. (C) Palakorn opined that it was possible to reduce the intensity of the conflict in the South to the levels seen over the previous twenty years, i.e. prior to 2004. However, he indicated that this process would probably take years, and would not happen until Thaksin was out of office. He emphasized how much antipathy many southern Muslims feel toward Thaksin and the Thai police. He also noted that it would take some time for the majority of "insurgent cells" -- made up primarily of young men -- to break up.

THAILAND'S TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP WITH MALAYSIA

18. (C) Palakorn indicated that former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's visit to Thailand on November 21 and 22 was considered a success by the royal family, but that Thaksin's relationship with his Malaysian counterparts remained troubled. He noted that Thaksin blamed Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi for not cooperating with RTG efforts on the South. However, Thaksin himself had made little effort to reach out to Badawi and failed to understand Malaysian concerns over the situation.

DIALOGUE WITH SEPARATISTS WILL NOT PRODUCE RESULTS

19. (C) Palakorn said it would not be possible for the RTG to establish a meaningful dialogue with leading separatist groups. He said that recent reports that the RTG was quietly reaching out to the Barasi Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C) and other separatist groups -- while likely true -- would not prove successful. (NOTE: septel will report on RTG exploratory talks with separatist groups. END NOTE) He said that in the past the RTG had limited success in setting up informal talks in Malaysia with separatist leaders. However, given the personal animosity felt towards Thaksin by the militants and the fractured relationship with Malaysia, a similar rapprochement was unlikely.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FROM THE NRC

10. (C) Palakorn said he has very low expectations for the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) and questioned whether its chairman -- former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun -- understood the South well enough to present recommendations that would ameliorate the situation. Moreover, while Anand intends to finish the commission's work he feels that he has been "set up" by Thaksin and that the government has little intention of following his recommendations.

QUEEN REMAINS FOCUSED ON PLIGHT OF SOUTHERN BUDDHISTS

11. (C) Palakorn accompanied the Queen during her recently completed month-long annual visit to the South. She is "saddened" by the extreme security measures in place for her when she is in the region -- she only travels by helicopter -- and feels she has been "cut off" from the local populace. He indicated that the Queen remains concerned about "innocent Buddhists" hurt in the conflict. The Ambassador asked if she was also concerned about Muslim victims of the violence. Palakorn respond that "until a few months ago 99 percent of the victims were Buddhists." (NOTE: Our information suggest that while a majority of victims are Buddhists, a significant number are Muslims. END NOTE)

SITUATION IS LOCAL/ETHNIC NOT INTERNATIONAL/RELIGIOUS

12. (C) Palakorn emphasized that the conflict in the South remained primarily based on ethnicity and not on religion, and that the sense of Malay identity, rather than Islam, remains the core factor in the unrest. He noted that following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, there were greater calls for Islamic solidarity in the South, but this remains a secondary factor in the conflict. He emphasized that there are no indications of direct outside involvement in the South.

COMMENT

13. (C) Palakorn offers a rare glimpse of the royal family's views on both the southern situation and Thaksin. Palakorn indicated that the King was carefully considering how to address the South in his birthday remarks, set to be delivered on December 4. The speculation from such a well placed and high-level source that Prime Minister Thaksin might have been aware of the planned disappearance of the lawyer Somchai is troubling. Post will continue to forcefully advocate at all levels strong U.S. views about

respect for human rights in the South. END COMMENT
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: PALAKORN SUWANRATH

14. (C) Privy Counselor Palakorn Suwanrath was born on July 14, 1948, in Bangkok, to a prominent family. His father, Phuang, was a well respected technocrat who worked extensively with the royal family. Palakorn spent his early life in Songkhla, where his father was posted, before moving to Bangkok to pursue his secondary education. He obtained a BA in political science from Chulalongkorn University and a MA in political science from Ohio University. He attended the National Defense College in 1994.

15. (U) In 1973 Palakorn became a career Ministry of Interior (MOI) officer, starting in the Policy and Planning Bureau. He worked his way through the ranks, eventually becoming the Vice Governor of Satun in 1989 and Vice Governor of Prachuap Khirikhan in 1991. Palakorn became Governor of Pattani in 1992 and Chiang Mai in 1996.

16. (U) In December 1997, he was appointed Director of the now-defunct Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), located in Yala, while serving concurrently as Deputy Perm-Sec at MOI.

17. (U) Beside his Interior posts, Palakorn has also served as a board member of the Expressway and Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Metropolitan Electricity Authority, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Provincial Electricity Authority, and as a board member of the Electricity-Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and the Government Savings Bank.

18. (C) On July 18, 2001, Palakorn resigned his position at the SBPAC -- 7 years before his slated retirement. The following day he was appointed Privy Counselor by the King. At that time there was widespread public speculation that he was forced to resign because of conflicts over the handling of the southern situation with then Interior Minister Purachai Piamsombun and Prime Minister Thaksin. Most observers saw his immediate appointment to the Privy Council as a sign of the King's displeasure with Thaksin. However, Palakorn told the Ambassador that this was not the case. He said during his father's funeral in April 2001 the King informed him that he would be given a "special position" in the future. Palakorn says he was tapped to join the Privy Council on July 9, 2001, obligating him to resign immediately from the MOI. Palakorn explained that his current position on the Privy Council precluded him from talking publicly about the timing of his appointment, which fed speculation that the appointment was a deliberate slap at Thaksin by the King.

19. (C) Palakorn is married to Khunying Dhasaniya; they have a grown son. END BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
BOYCE